



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON INVASIVE SPECIES

Jim Doyle, Governor

One Point Place, Suite 101
Madison, WI 53719-2809
Office: 608/ 662-0923
Fax: 608/ 833-7179
www.invasivespecies.wi.gov

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Wisconsin Association of Lakes
Madison

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Madison

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Department of Agricultural, Trade and
Consumer Protection
Madison

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Contact:

Jane Larson, 608/224-5005, jane.larson@datcp.state.wi.us
WI Dept. of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection

Invasion of the Giant African Snails

When Pets Become Alien Attackers

You're wandering through your local pet store or pet swap meet searching for the perfect pet, but you want something special, something out of the ordinary. There – a Giant African Snail as big as your hand! No shedding, no walks in the rain or cold, no special food required, plus it's so unique. This snail is perfect! Or is it?

In 2004, state and federal officials collected over one thousand Giant African Snails and their eggs from pet stores, pet swap meets, day care centers, schools and homes throughout Wisconsin. Although viewed by many as the perfect pet or educational tool for the classroom, the fact is that these snails are illegal in the United States.

Scientists consider the Giant African Snail (*Achatina fulica*) to be one of the most damaging land snails in the world. The mollusks are a threat to agricultural crops and other vegetation, and will eat more than 500 types of plants. If illegal or exotic pets like Giant African Snails are released or if they escape into the environment, they can have major ecological impacts and cause environmental damage that requires tax dollars to remediate.

In the mid-1960's, a young boy sneaked three Giant African Snails into Florida. The snails were later released into his grandmother's back yard. Florida spent \$1 million over 10 years to eradicate the 18,000 snails that resulted from the original three. Hawaii also has worked to eradicate these pests from their state.

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As an invasive species, Giant African Snails are a concern of our state's political leaders. The Wisconsin State Legislature demonstrated a firm commitment to address the issue of invasive species in Wisconsin by creating the Governor's Council on Invasive Species, to which Governor Jim Doyle appointed 13 members. The Council was created to address the issues of invasive species that harm Wisconsin's ecological and economic resources, as well as human health. Governor Doyle stated: "It is important that we acknowledge the growing threat from invasive species to our natural resources and state's economy, and that we work to find solutions."

If these snails are sold in a pet store or at a pet swap meet, how could they be harmful? That's the key – just because an animal, reptile, mollusk or some creature is for sale, it may not be a wise purchase; it may even be illegal. Individuals caught smuggling Giant African Snails into the state could be subject to penalties of up to \$1,000.

There is also the possibility that exotic pets can transmit diseases. In 2003, prairie dogs that were sold at a pet swap meet in Wisconsin were found to be infected with monkey pox. The prairie dogs had been exposed to infected Gambian pouched rats through an Illinois animal wholesaler. The disease was not known to exist outside of Africa until several people in Wisconsin became sick with monkey pox that was transmitted by the prairie dogs. As a result, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection has banned the importation, sale and movement of all prairie dogs and other mammals that have come into contact with prairie dogs since April 1, 2003.

Do some research and understand what you're buying before you hand over your cash, especially if you are interested in something out of the ordinary. Check with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Bureau of Animal Health, (608) 224-4872, or the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), (608) 231-9545. "Although a pet may seem exotic and harmless, make your choices carefully so that you don't impact the health and safety of our citizens or our environment," said Governor Doyle.

If you see the Giant African Snails or other illegal animals at a pet store, school or pet swap meet, call DATCP at 1-800-462-2803, or the federal hotline at 1-800-877-3835. For online information and photos, see www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/ep/emerging_pests/gas.html.

Information for this news release provided by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

This news release is sponsored by the Governor's Council on Invasive Species. The Wisconsin State Legislature created the Council, to which Governor Doyle appointed 13 members. The Council's mission is to prevent and reduce the harmful impacts of invasive species on Wisconsin's environment and economy, as well as human well-being. Funding for this news release was provided, in part, by a grant from the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program.